The Genesis of Christchurch

Lionel D C Hartley

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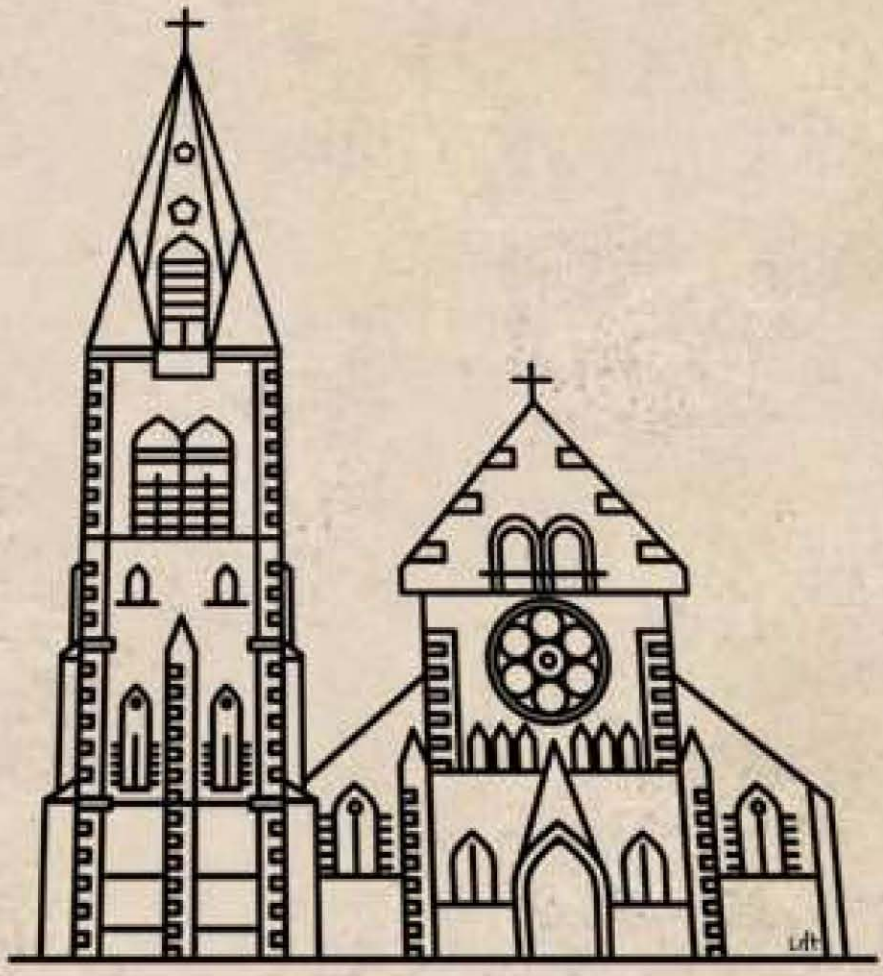
A Pocketbook by Lionel D. C. Hartley



The iconic Gothic Christchurch Cathedral located in Cathedral Square is one of the most recognisable historic landmarks in Christchurch. Constructed between 1864 and 1904 it was built using locally sourced timber and stone.

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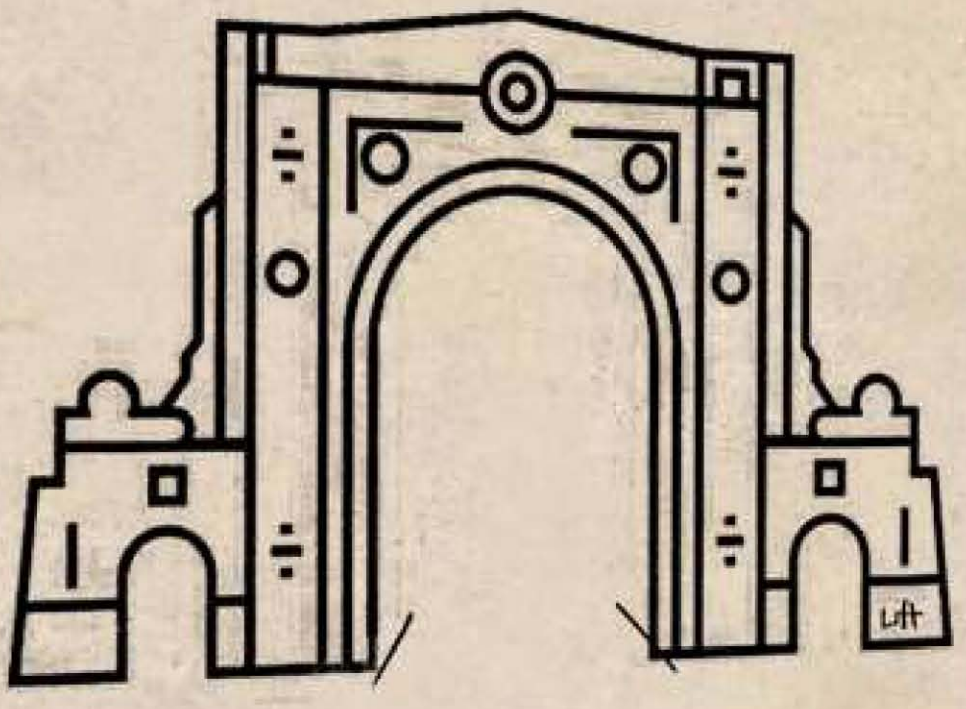

The Bridge of Remembrance War Memorial arch in Cashel Street is inscribed with "Quid non pro patria" ("What will a person not do for his country") has a bridge crossing the Avon River.

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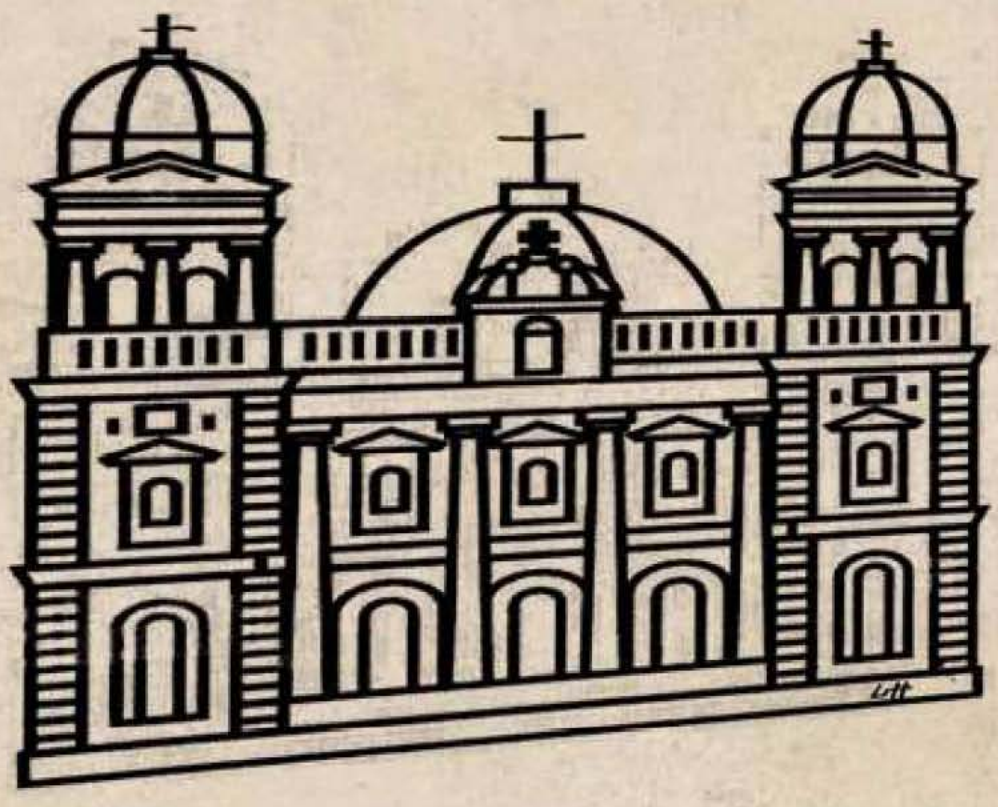

The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes referred to as the Christchurch Basilica, is a Catholic cathedral on Barbadoes Street, Cristchuerch

Introduction

In this pocketbook I will seek to explore the origins of Christchurch - not simply the moment British settlers arrived in 1850, but the much deeper story stretching back over 700 years.

Christchurch is often described as 'New Zealand's most English city.' While there is truth in its Victorian architecture and Anglican heritage, that description overlooks centuries of Maori history and the complex interactions that shaped Canterbury before European colonisation.

Christchurch is located in the South Island, which is known by the Maori as 'Te Waipounamu'

Your author expresses gratitude to the Canterbury Museum and the Canterbury Public Library for allowing him to research in their respective libraries.

About the Author

Lionel D C Hartley is a teenager living in Christchurch with a keen interest in the origins of this fine city and a genuine concern for the divisions between Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori) peoples.

This pocket book was written by a kiwi-born Pakeha, with the deliberate intention of including the Maori perspective in relating our history to the present generation.

Memo 1 The Landscape Before Humans

To understand Christchurch, we first need to understand the land itself. The city sits on the Canterbury Plains, one of the world's largest alluvial plains.

Over eons of time, the Southern Alps rose through tectonic collision, rivers carried enormous quantities of gravel eastward and these sediments gradually built the flat plains.

Banks Peninsula where I was born, however, tells a different story.

It consists of two extinct shield volcanoes that erupted before human habitation here.

As sea levels changed, estuaries formed around the coast.

The Avon and Heathcote Rivers wound through wetlands before emptying into the Avon-Heathcote Estuary.

Long before Europeans admired the city's

rivers, these waterways supported abundant food resources: birds, eels, flounder and shellfish plus forests, flax and fertile soils. It was an ideal place to live.

Memo 2 First Maori Settlement

Polynesian navigators reached New Zealand approximately 1250-1300 BC. The earliest settlers of Canterbury (iwi) were descendants of these remarkable ocean voyagers. Early iwi included the Waitaha, Kati Mamoe and Ngai Tahu immigrants

These groups did not simply replace one another, instead, migration, warfare and intermarriage created a changing political landscapes.

The Waitaha were among the earliest people to occupy much of the South Island. They established seasonal settlements, fishing villages and bird-hunting camps. Food gathering followed seasonal cycles. These communities travelled between inland and coastal resources.

The wetlands surrounding modern Christchurch were especially valuable and the area around the Avon became a rich source of eels, whitebait and

waterfowl.

Around the sixteenth century Kati Mamoe migrated south from the North Island.

Although conflict first occurred with Waitaha, eventually many communities merged. Marriage often proved more effective than warfare.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, Ngai Tahu gradually became dominant across most of the South Island.

They developed extensive trade networks. Highly prized commodities included greenstone (pounamu), preserved birds, fish and woven cloaks

Canterbury became an important centre of Ngai Tahu life. They established an important pa (fortified meeting place) at Kaiapoi, which became one of the largest trading centres in New Zealand with goods travelling remarkable distances.

Memo 3 Early Life Around Christchurch

The area we think of a Christchurch was not heavily fortified, instead, much of the region consisted of separate food-gathering areas as families moved seasonally.

Important locations included the Riccarton bush, the numerous wetlands and estuaries, the rivers and the coastal settlements.

Large permanent villages were relatively uncommon directly where Cathedral Square now stands, instead, occupation shifted according to available resources.

Sadly, the landscape that Europeans later drained had been one of New Zealand's richest wetland ecosystems. The city now floats above a swamp, presenting long-term concerns as the city is also on a major tectonic fault line.

Memo 4 The Legend of Te Waipounamu

The Legend of Te Waipounamu is one of the great ancestral traditions of Maori, explaining the origins of New Zealand's South Island and its landscapes. There are several related traditions from different iwi, so there is no single version, but these are among the best known.

1) The story of Aoraki

One of the most important traditions is that of Aoraki.

According to Ngai Tahu tradition, Aoraki and his three brothers were sons of the sky father, Rakinui. They travelled across the ocean in their canoe while exploring the world, however their canoe struck a hidden reef and overturned. As they climbed onto the hull, a freezing southerly wind turned them to stone. The overturned canoe became the South Island, and the brothers became the Southern Alps. Aoraki himself became the highest

mountain in New Zealand, Mount Cook.

This story expresses the deep connection between ancestors and the land, showing that the mountains are living ancestors rather than simply physical features.

2) The story of Rakaihautu

Another foundational tradition is that of Rakaihautu.

He arrived in Te Waipounamu aboard the ancestral waka Uruao. Carrying his sacred digging stick, Tuwhakaroria, he journeyed through the island, creating many of the great inland lakes. His son Rakihouia travelled along the coast establishing settlements, while Rakaihautu explored the interior. Together, their journeys established the ancestral connections of Waitaha to the land.

3) Pounamu (the greenstone)

The name "Te Waipounamu" means "the waters of greenstone" Pounamu (New Zealand jade) is found mainly in rivers on the West Coast of the South Island. It has long been treasured for making tools, weapons, and ornaments and remains one of the most significant taonga in Maori culture.

The Meaning of the Legends

These traditions are not simply stories about how the landscape was formed. They explain the genealogical connections (whakapapa) between people and the land, they record ancestral journeys and place names, they teach respect for mountains, rivers, lakes, and forests and they express the identity and history of iwi such as Ngai Tahu, whose whakapapa includes Waitaha and Kati Mamoe ancestors.

Together, the traditions of Aoraki and Rakaihautu form the foundation of many Maori understandings of the South Island (Te Waipounamu), linking its mountains, lakes, rivers, and people through shared ancestry and cultural memory.

Memo 5 European Exploration

The first European known to sight the Canterbury coast was Captain James Cook in 1770, although Cook never landed in Christchurch itself.

Later came sealers, whalers, traders and missionaries.

During the early nineteenth century increasing numbers of Europeans visited Canterbury. As a consequence, trade expanded.

The Maori exchanged flax, food and labouring exchange for metal tools, muskets, blankets and manufactured goods which transformed Maori society.

Memo 6 Banks Peninsular

An interesting historical possibility concerns French colonisation as they established settlements at Akaroa, the place of my birth.

Akaroa is a small harbour town on the eastern side of Banks Peninsula. Its name comes from the Maori name "Whangaroa", meaning "long harbour". It is a beautiful scenic walk of only 80 miles (I often walk there one day, stay overnight and return the next.)

Akaroa is notable for both its Maori heritage and its unique place in New Zealand's colonial history:

In 1840, French settlers arrived under the sponsorship of the Nanto-Bordelaise Company, intending to establish a French colony. By the time they arrived, the British had already proclaimed sovereignty over New Zealand through the Treaty of Waitangi and subsequent actions. As a result, Akaroa became a

predominantly French-influenced town rather than a French colony.

Had events unfolded differently, Banks Peninsula-and perhaps more of Canterbury-might have become French territory.

Today Akaroa is known for its French street names, colonial architecture, harbour, and wildlife, including the rare Hector's dolphin, one of the world's smallest and rarest dolphins.

In the Maori historical narrative, the harbour was an important settlement area for Ngai Tahu and earlier iwi, including Waitaha and Kati Mamoe. Banks Peninsula has many significant fortified villages (pa), smaller villages (kainga), and food-gathering sites (mahinga kai). One of the best-known sites is the beautiful Onawe Pa, which played a central role in Ngai Tahu history and has become a bit f a tourist attraction today.

Memo 7 The Treaty of Waitangi

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is New Zealand's founding constitutional document. It was first signed on 6 February 1840 at Waitangi Treaty Grounds by representatives of the British Crown and many Maori chiefs (rangatira).

Two texts were used. The Te Tiriti o Waitangi Maori-language text which most Maori chiefs signed and The Treaty of Waitangi (the English-language text), which differed in important ways.

These differences have had lasting legal and political significance.

In Article 1, the English text says Maori ceded 'sovereignty' to the British Crown, the Maori text uses the word 'kawanatanga', often translated as 'governorship,' which modern Maori argue conveyed a more limited concept than full sovereignty.

In Article 2, the English text guarantees

Maori "full exclusive and undisturbed possession" of their lands, forests, fisheries, and other property. The Maori text guarantees full chieftainship or authority (tino rangatiratanga) over lands, villages, and treasured possessions (taonga), both tangible and intangible.

In Article 3, both texts extend to Maori the rights and privileges of British subjects.

The Treaty became the basis for the British Crown's claim to govern New Zealand, but many promises made to Maori were later breached through land confiscations, unfair land purchases, and other government actions. At present a Waitangi Tribunal is being established to investigate claims that the Crown breached the Treaty.

The Treaty remains a living document, widely recognised as a foundational agreement that shapes the relationship between the Crown and Maori in New Zealand (Aotearoa).

Memo 8 Colonisation

The nineteenth century witnessed organised British colonisation. Unlike earlier settlers, these migrants arrived under planned settlement schemes. One of the most influential organisations was the New Zealand Company. Although it founded settlements elsewhere, Canterbury followed a different path.

In 1848 the Canterbury Association was established. Its leaders included Edward Gibbon Wakefield and John Robert Godley

Their vision was distinctive. Rather than creating an ordinary colonial town, they wanted an ideal Anglican settlement. Land sales would fund churches, schools and immigration

It was envisioned that the new society would include all social classes and the plan aimed to recreate English rural society (whether that has happened in practice is another question).

The proposal to name the new settlement 'Christchurch' is generally attributed to John Robert Godley, who had studied at Christ Church, University of Oxford, one of the largest and most prestigious colleges at the University of Oxford. The name honoured that college and symbolised the educational and Anglican ideals the Canterbury Association hoped to establish in New Zealand.

Godley (1814-1861) was an Anglo-Irish statesman and is widely regarded as the founder of Canterbury's organised European settlement. Appointed as the Canterbury Association's chief agent, he arrived in Canterbury in April 1850, several months before the main body of settlers aboard the First Four Ships. During those months, he supervised preparations for the new colony, including roads, housing, and administrative arrangements.

Surveyors Captain Joseph Thomas and Edward Jollie selected the site. Several features recommended it as there was flat land, navigable rivers, fertile soils and access to Lyttelton Harbour.

The harbour became the settlement's port, the plains became its agricultural hinterland and a tunnel would later connect them.

Initially, however, travel over the Port Hills was exhausting. Everything had to cross the Bridle Path.

Memo 9 The Lyttelton Tunnel

*In 1857 the Lyttelton Tunnel was born
With pic and shovel they made their way
Through rock and soil and thorn.

When *Railway Billy* Moorhouse
Turned the first sod to start it,
A team of brave and hardy workmen
Dug twelve-point-nine furlongs
Into the volcano to finish it.

Dormant igneous basalt rock
Presented a ten-year challenge.
Tunnelling from both ends,
Engineer Edward Dobson saw
That both ends met and matched
Ready for the grand opening.*

* LDCH

The Lyttelton Rail Tunnel (originally known as the Moorhouse Tunnel) is one of New Zealand's greatest engineering achievements. Opened in 1867, it transformed Canterbury by creating a direct rail connection between

Christchurch and its deep-water port at Lyttelton. At the time, it was one of the most ambitious civil engineering projects ever undertaken in the Southern Hemisphere.

When the first Canterbury settlers arrived in 1850, Lyttelton was the colony's port, while Christchurch was being established on the plains beyond the Port Hills. The steep volcanic hills between them made transport slow and expensive.

Initially, people crossed the hills on the steep Bridle Path and heavy goods were unloaded at Lyttelton, transferred to small boats, carried across the Avon-Heathcote Estuary to Ferrymead, and then transported by wagon to Christchurch.

This complicated system increased costs and delayed trade, leading many to argue that a tunnel through the hills was the only practical long-term solution.

The tunnel became the defining political issue of the 1857 election for the Superintendent of Canterbury Province. Candidate William Sefton Moorhouse strongly supported the project, despite criticism that it was too expensive for a small colony.

Nicknamed 'Railway Billy', Moorhouse

argued that Canterbury's future prosperity depended on a direct link to its port. His election victory gave him the mandate to proceed with the project.

Construction officially began on 17 July 1861, when Moorhouse turned the first sod.

The work was far more difficult than expected. The tunnel had to pass through the flank of an extinct volcano beneath the Port Hills. The volcanic basalt rock proved much harder than engineers anticipated. Ventilation, drainage and accurate surveying presented major engineering challenges. Unsurprisingly, the original contractors withdrew before completion, requiring new arrangements to finish the work.

Provincial Engineer Edward Dobson supervised much of the project. One of his greatest achievements was ensuring the tunnel headings driven from opposite ends met almost perfectly in May 1867, a remarkable surveying feat using 19th-century equipment.

Before trains began running, hundreds of residents walked through the completed tunnel during a public open day. Key milestones were 18 November 1867, the first locomotive passed through; late November 1867, the first freight train

operated; and 9 December 1867, regular passenger services began.

The journey through the 1½-mile tunnel takes only about 6½ minutes from the tunnel mouth on each side of the foothills, replacing an arduous trip over the top.

When completed, the tunnel achieved several notable distinctions: New Zealand's first railway tunnel, The first tunnel in the world to be driven through the side of an extinct volcano and at the time it was the longest tunnel in New Zealand.

Although we can travel to places like Dunedin by steam train, as rail traffic increased, smoke from steam locomotives made the Lyttleton tunnel unpleasant for crews and passengers.

To solve this, the Christchurch-Lyttelton line became New Zealand's first electrified suburban railway opening under 1,500-volt DC overhead wires on 14 February 1929. Electric locomotives now haul trains through the tunnel. There are plans affot to further change the electric trains with diesel locomotives although this has not been finalised yet.

The opening of the £3,000,000 Lyttelton Road Tunnel in 1964 has greatly reduced

passenger rail use between Christchurch and Lyttelton although freight traffic remains strong.

The road tunnel officially opened on 27 February 1964, with Governor-General Sir Bernard Fergusson presiding over the ceremony, attended by Prime Minister Keith Holyoake. Before opening to traffic, thousands of local residents walked through the tunnel to admire the new engineering achievement. It is currently New Zealand's longest road tunnel.

To help repay construction costs, motorists currently pay a toll to use the tunnel, with the plan for tolls to remain in place for decades until the project has been fully funded.

Memo 10 The First Four Ships

The defining moment in Christchurch's European foundation came in December 1850.

Four ships (Charlotte Jane, Randolph, Sir George Seymour and Cressy) departed England carrying approximately 790 settlers.

They landed at Lyttelton. From there they climbed the steep Bridle Path before descending onto the plains. Imagine carrying furniture, livestock and supplies over those hills. Settlement required immense physical effort.

Memo 11 Planning Christchurch

Unlike many colonial towns, Christchurch was carefully planned. Surveyors created, a rectangular street grid, public squares, wide streets and reserves. Central features included Cathedral Square, Hagley Park and the Botanic Gardens site.

The Avon River became a defining feature rather than an obstacle.

Many streets were named after Anglican bishoprics reflecting the city's religious origins.: Armagh, Cashel, Gloucester and Hereford

Memo 12 Early Growth

The city expanded rapidly as agriculture drove prosperity.

Sheep farming transformed Canterbury and Christchurch became and administrative centre, a commercial hub and a religious and educational centre.

Institutions soon followed which included schools, churches, newspapers and cultural organisations.

By the 1860s Christchurch was one of New Zealand's principal cities.

Memo 13 The Garden City

Christchurch gained its reputation as the Garden City through deliberate planning.

Large public reserves remained protected.

Trees imported from Britain transformed the landscape.

English oaks, elms and willows gradually reshaped the appearance of the city.

This created a familiar environment for settlers while profoundly changing native ecosystems.

Memo 14 Maori and Settler Relations

The story was not one of peaceful progress alone.

European settlement brought profound consequences for Ngai Tahu.

Large land purchases, many now regarded as deeply unfair, resulted in the loss of most tribal lands.

Promises regarding schools, hospitals and reserves were frequently unmet.

These grievances eventually led to the legal claims and settlements currently underway in the hopes that modern Christchurch will recognise this shared history.

Memo 15 Christchurch Through Disaster

The city's history has also been shaped by adversity.

Major events include the Maori wars, the World Wars I and II, flooding, fires, and minor earth tremors with the expectancy of a major earthquake (New Zealand is situated on a tectonic fault line).

Memo 16 Summary

The origins of Christchurch cannot be reduced to a single founding date.

Instead, they represent layers of history including geological creation over eons of time, Maori settlement beginning around the thirteenth century with flourishing Ngai Tahu communities, European exploration, planned Anglican colonisation, Victorian era urban planning and continual adaptation through environmental and social change

Christchurch is therefore both an ancient Maori landscape and a relatively young colonial city. Understanding both stories provides a fuller appreciation of the city's past and present.

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